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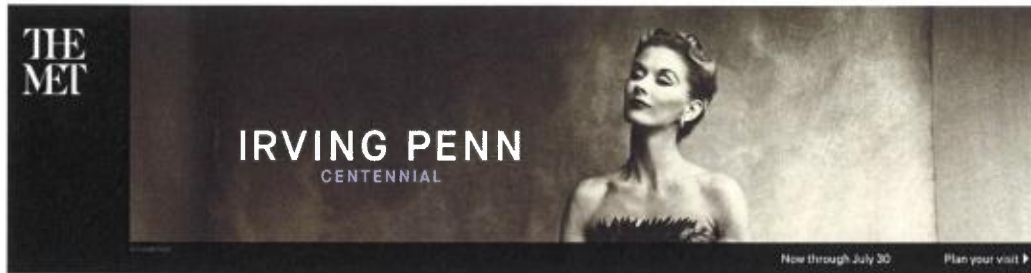


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The Opinion Pages OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Rhetoric and Bullets



Charles M. Blow

JUNE 15, 2017



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A police officer guarding the Capitol after a shooting in nearby Alexandria, Va., on Wednesday.  
Aaron P. Bernstein/Reuters

In 2011, after Representative Gabby Giffords of Arizona was gravely injured and six others were killed by a shooter in Tucson, I was moved to commit [an entire column](#) to condemning the left for linking the shooting so closely to political rhetoric.

Yes, Republican personalities and officials in the wake of Barack Obama's election had spoken openly about "Second Amendment remedies" and being "armed and dangerous" and "revolution," but it was not possible to connect the dots between that irresponsible talk and the Tucson shooter.

Now, here I am again, only this time extending the same condemnation to the right for [doing the same](#) after four people, including House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, [were shot](#) at an Alexandria, Va., baseball field where Republican members of Congress were practicing in advance of a charity game.

The shooter, identified as [James T. Hodgkinson](#), appears to have had strong liberal, anti-Trump, anti-Republican views — among other things, he was a



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Mr Blow, you and others have been extremely vociferous, calling for "Resistance" at all levels - remember who said "If they bring a knife to...

**Raul Campos** June 16, 2017

Mr. Blow, it doesn't surprise me that you mistakenly believe that political hate speech is not contributory to acts of political violence....

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The very real possibility that the shooting was politically motivated was clearly on the minds of many, including [Representative Rodney Davis](#), Republican of Illinois, who was at the baseball field during the shooting: "This could be the first political rhetorical terrorist attack, and that has to stop."

Let me be clear: I don't have a problem with viewing these incidents through a political lens. Not to do so is naïve and ridiculously self-blinding in a way that avoids reality.

As [Katy Waldman wrote for Slate](#) last June:

"Things that happen for political reasons, and have political consequences, demand that we scrutinize them through a political lens. Crying 'politicization' is itself politicization — a way to advance whatever slate of politics favors the status quo. Often people invoke policy goals in order to *get things done*; what's at stake is whether these tragedies should be regarded as irreducible lightning strikes or problems with potential solutions."

What I abhor is ideological exploitation that reduces these acts to a political sport and uses them as weapons to silence political opponents and their "rhetoric," rather than viewing them as American tragedies that we can work together to prevent through honest appraisal and courageous action. Every shooting in this country is a tragedy, and they happen with disturbing frequency here.

As [The Washington Post](#) reported, Wednesday's shooting was the 154th mass shooting so far this year in America. That's 154 mass shootings in just 165 days. Violence, particularly gun violence, is the American fact, the

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This country has a violent culture, is full of guns, and our federal lawmakers — mostly Republicans, it must be said, because there isn't any real equivalency — are loath to even moderately regulate gun access.

Pretending that America's gun violence is a function of collective political rhetoric rather than the nexus of personal mental defect and easy access to weapons is a way of dodging, well, the bullet.

So, here I must take a stand in defense of rhetoric. While

rhetoric should never promote violence, it needn't be timid.

I was impressed by the official responses from Washington. Even Trump's response was sober and direct, not marred by his typical lack of tact, not like the way he tried to [exploit the Pulse Nightclub shooting](#) last year. House Speaker Paul Ryan delivered a stately speech from the House floor, and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi echoed his sentiments in [a noble act of bipartisanship](#).

At the top, the responses were pitch perfect, but the political debate isn't confined to the top. It trickles down into the cesspool of social media, which has grown exponentially since Giffords was shot. At that time, Facebook had only about a third of its current number of users, Twitter had about a fifth of its current users, Instagram was just three months old, and Snapchat didn't exist.

On social media, where anonymity provides cover for vitriol, violent threats are a regular feature.

When Gabby Giffords [wrote on Twitter](#), "My heart is with my former colleagues, their families & staff, and the US Capitol Police — public servants and heroes today and every day," she was met with a sickening number of hateful responses, including one that said, "To bad it was not her." (Yes, it should have been "too," but grammar isn't a major concern in a statement that grotesque.)

It is true that political rhetoric can set a tone that greases the skids for a small number of people who are prone to violence to act on those impulses. We have just gone through a political cycle where that was on full display.

But some rhetoric is necessary and real. I believe Donald Trump and the Republican-led Congress are attempting to do very serious harm to the country and its most vulnerable citizens, and I will never stop saying so in the strongest terms I can summon. For many people, this isn't an abstract policy debate between partisans. For them, these debates — about repealing the Affordable Care Act, for example — are about life and death. But that has nothing to do with the promotion of physical violence; it has everything to do with protecting this country from administrative and legislative violence.

We have to object stridently to proposals that will hurt people, and not be chilled by a deranged man with a gun. Violence is abhorrent and self-defeating, but vigorous resistance to national damage has nothing to do

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You can, as I do, have sympathy for the victims of yesterday's shooting and condemn the shooter, while at the same time raging, nonviolently of course, against an agenda that places other Americans in very real danger.

I invite you to join me on [Facebook](#) and follow me on [Twitter \(@CharlesMBlow\)](#), or email me at [chblow@nytimes.com](mailto:chblow@nytimes.com).

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